



Research Report

IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS IN SIERRA LEONE



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Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Civil Society Organisations in Sierra Leone

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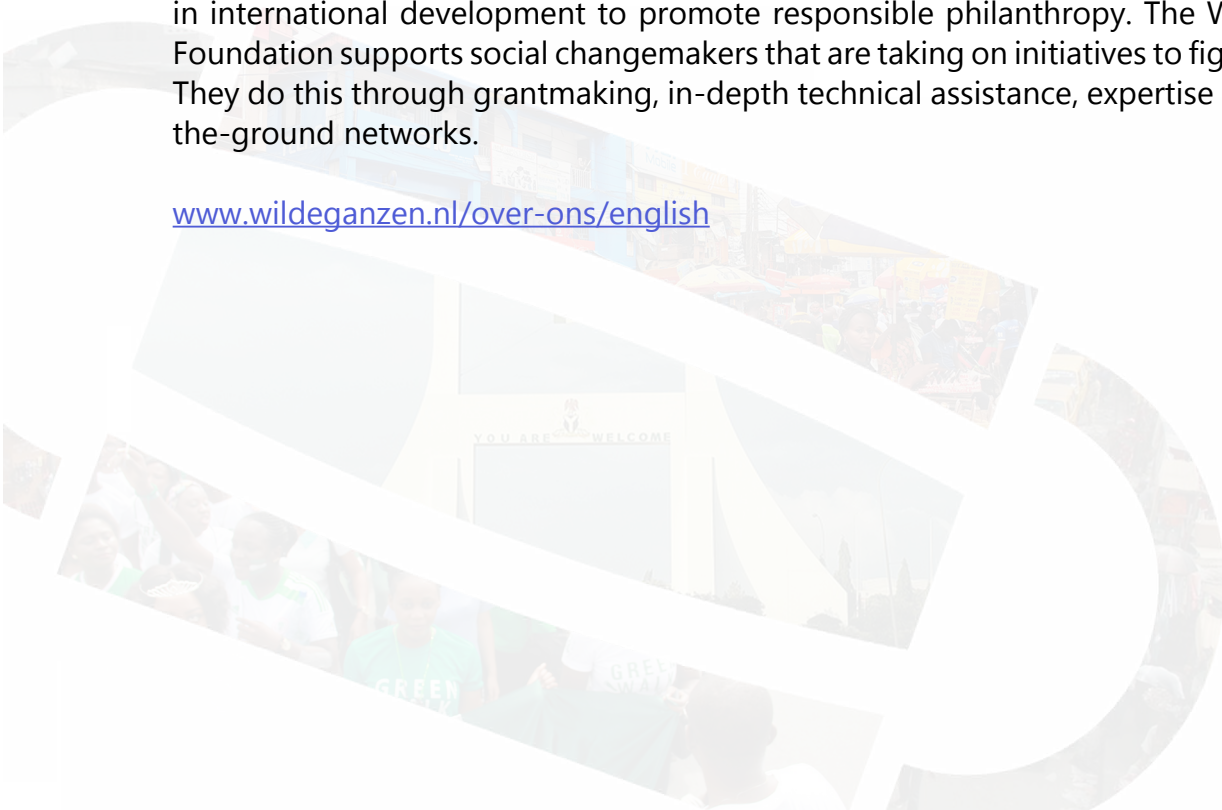
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This study was commissioned by the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) with support from Wilde Ganzen Foundation. It sought to understand the extent to which COVID-19 has impacted civil society organisations (CSOs) and provide knowledge-based findings to inform strategies for addressing the ruinous impact of COVID-19 on CSOs in Sierra Leone.

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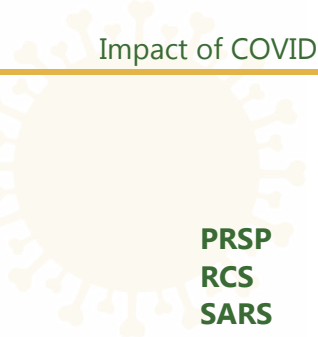
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LIST OF ACRONYMS & ABBREVIATIONS

ACC	Anti-Corruption Commission
AAD-SL	Action for Advocacy and Development Sierra Leone
CAC	Corporate Affairs Commission
CAGs	Community Action Groups
CBAN	Community Biodiversity Action Network
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CIVICUS	World Alliance for Citizen Participation
CHWs	Community Health Care Workers
CSO	Civil Society Organisations
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
CYPA-SL	Children and Youth for Peace Agency – Sierra Leone
CBRS	Community Based Rehabilitation Services
DCI-SL	Defence for Children International Sierra Leone
DFID	Department for International Development
EU	European Union
FBO	Faith Based Organisation
FID-SL	Foundation for Integrated Development- Sierra Leone
FYEA	Foundation for Youth Empowerment and Advocacy
GAA	Girls Advocacy Alliance
IEC	Information, Education and Communication
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IMF	International Monitoring Fund
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organisations
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
IPC	Infection Prevention and Control
KADDRO	Kambia District Development and Rehabilitation Organization
LMIC	Low and Medium-Income Countries
MOFED	Ministry of Finance and Economic Development
NACOVERC	National Coronavirus Response Centre
MAPSEO	Mambolo Action for Progress, Social Enterprise Organisation
MERS	Middle East Respiratory Syndrome
MAPED	Ministry of Planning and Economic Planning
NACSA	National Commission for Social Action
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisation
NUS	National Union of Students
PHEIC	Public Health Emergency of International Concern
NPHEOC	National Public Health Emergency Operations Center
PiH	Partners in Health
PHU	Primary Health Care Unit



PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
RCS	Risk Communication Strategy
SARS	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
NATCOM	National Telecommunication Commission
SLANGO	Sierra Leone Association of Non – Government Organisation
SLCRC	Sierra Leone Child Rights Coalition
SLLC	Sierra Leone Labour Congress
SLTU	Sierra Leone Teachers Union
SOPs	Standard Operating Procedures
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
UN	United Nations
WACSI	West Africa Civil Society Institute
WEF	World Economic Forum
WHI	World Hope International
WHO	World Health Organization



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has plagued Sierra Leone since March 2020. Since the first reported case on 31 March 2020, the number of confirmed cases has increased to 1, 947, with 1, 502 recovered, and 69 deaths as of 14 August 2020 (NACOVERC, Daily Media Update 2020). The pandemic has affected every facet of the Sierra Leonean society, including the civil society sector. Some civil society organisations (CSOs) closed their offices and cancelled operations, programmes and project activities in communities either because of loss of funding, increased organisational costs or restriction of staff movements. However, while some organisations adopt a work-from-home policy, many more CSOs are struggling in this transition. This is mainly either because these organisations do not have in place policies to work remotely or lack the required resources and capacity including computers and internet connectivity to work remotely.

The West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) in partnership with the WILDE GANZEN Foundation is conducting this research to assess the impact of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on CSOs in Sierra Leone and the responses adopted by the latter to ensure their short-term survival and long-term sustainability. The research utilised a mixed methods approach by combining both quantitative and qualitative techniques, as well as desk reviews. Primary data were collected using survey questionnaires and focus group discussions (FDGs) and participant observation. A total of sixty-eight (68) CSOs in the country completed the survey questionnaires and of this, sixteen (16) participated in the FDGs. To make the assessment nationally representative, categories of CSOs represented in this research included

(non-governmental Organisation (NGOs) (33), community based organisations (CBOs) (29), unions/coalitions/umbrella bodies (2) and others: faith-based organisations, social enterprise organisations and social movements (4). Field data were collected between mid-June and late July 2020, over a combined period of six weeks.

Key Findings

- The study has established that 97% of CSOs collaborated and partnered with other CSOs in their respective communities, districts and at the national level in support of a range of issues to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and increase the provision of services to beneficiaries and communities;
- Also, the research has revealed that 63% of CSOs were not prepared to cope with the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to their operations and programmes. As a result, 38% of CSOs closed their offices because they could not work remotely as a result of the lack of resources and capacity to work remotely.
- Additionally, the finding from the study shows that 90% of CSOs who participated in the research did not have any reserves to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their funding to support their programmes, operations and activities for beneficiaries in communities during the pandemic.
- The research has also shown that, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in greater public appreciation for the work of CSOs during emergencies in Sierra Leone.

- Unfortunately, the research has shown that the government failed to effectively recognise and utilise the skills, experience and networks of CSOs (e.g. CBOs, NGOs, unions/coalitions/umbrella bodies, FBOs, social enterprise organisations and social movements in response to COVID-19. The research found that due to office closure and restrictions of staff movements, CSOs resorted to the use of technology (information communication technology (ICT)) to continue providing services and programmes to beneficiaries and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. As shown by the research findings, 78% of the sampled CSOs implemented work-from-home arrangements although 72% reported that they had no such arrangements in place before the COVID-19 pandemic struck in Sierra Leone. This innovation therefore allowed CSOs to work remotely from home and continue some of their operations, programmes and activities targeting beneficiaries and communities.
- More importantly, the research revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic presents opportunities for the mobilisation of domestic resources. In fact, 35% of CSOs who participated in the research mobilised domestic resources to complement donor funding during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Lessons Learnt

- **Networking and coalition building:** Most of the response activities of CSOs in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic were done by networking and collaborating with other CSOs. This lesson can as well be effective in post COVID-19 programme design and implementation.
- **Domestic resource mobilisation:** Only few CSOs indicated they mobilised domestic resources to support their programmes and interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The limited funding opportunities from international NGOs (INGOs) provides CSOs with a unique learning opportunity that local CSOs need to find alternative ways of mobilising resources for their organisations, operations and programmes.
- **Improved visibility on the work of CSOs:** CSOs have increased their visibility during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is largely because the media is strategically focused on the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic in Sierra Leone. This is a lesson that CSOs should leverage or continue to improve after the COVID-9 pandemic in Sierra Leone. As an opportunity, there is need to continue such visibility enhancing activities. Given the advances in technology, CSOs have combined their use of social media and have harnessed their online presence, connected with new audiences and secured support from new supporters. For this reason, there is the need for CSOs to prioritise investments in technology in the post COVID-19 period as they restructure and revamp their operations.
- **Re-orienting programmes and operations:** Another lesson is that CSOs could be agile and innovative in response to changing operating environments and community needs. This experience provides CSOs with a framework for reviewing and re-assessing



their cost structures and operational requirements which could result in significant savings, improved operational efficiency and stimulate more innovation.

- Building trust and confidence between duty holders and duty bearers: Respondent CSOs also learnt that there was a low level of trust between beneficiaries and service providers (i.e. medical staff). This must improve in order to ensure respect, trust and honesty in the provision of essential services for beneficiaries in communities around communities in Sierra Leone.

Implications of the Research Findings For Policy and Practice

1. The research found that the COVID-19 pandemic to some extent threatened the sustainability of the civil society sector in Sierra Leone. This data is very vital to policy makers and stakeholders in the civil society sector because it suggests that if CSOs develop/strengthen and implement organisational sustainability plans, their organisations could be protected from complete or partial closure during or immediately after a pandemic like the COVID-19;
2. The research further revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic presents opportunities for the mobilisation of domestic resources. In fact, more than 30% of CSOs mobilised domestic resources to complement donor funding during the COVID-19 pandemic. The implication of this finding is that when domestic resources are developed well, they could serve as alternative resource mobilisation routes for CSOs to ensure their sustainability in the absence of donor funding;
3. The study also observed and concluded that due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent closure of offices and restriction of staff' movements, CSOs resorted to the use of technological infrastructure to continue their operations and provision of services to beneficiaries in communities. This finding informs policy makers including donors and CSOs themselves to provide adequate support to the digital transformation of CSOs in Sierra Leone through strategic investments in their technology infrastructure, from paying for laptops, connectivity and cloud services to staff training and the use of new tools and technological applications to continue providing services and programmes to beneficiaries and communities during emergency situations in the future;
4. The study additionally found out that 90% of CSOs struggled to provide services and programmes to beneficiaries and communities because they did not have reserves to respond to emergency situations. Only 10 per cent of respondents were able to continue their work with beneficiaries and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The implication is that when CSOs have adequate reserves, such could serve as alternative sources of revenue to support their programmes, operations and activities for beneficiaries in communities in the absence of donor or external funding during emergency situations;
5. At the same time, the study's findings revealed that 97% of CSOs collaborated and partnered with other CSOs in their respective communities, districts and at the national level in support of a range of issues to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The implication for this finding is that when CSOs organise and connect with other CSOs and stakeholders, they are more likely to successfully advocate and lobby for inclusion in national government responses to COVID-19 and emergency funding mechanisms.



INTRODUCTION





1.1 Background of the Study

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020. The COVID-19 disease caught the entire world unprepared (WHO, 2020), and has been spreading rapidly across the world since December 2019. Since the beginning of March 2020, the number of cases outside China rapidly increased and the number of affected countries has tripled (WHO, 2020). Globally, as of 14 August 2020, the outbreak had resulted in an estimated 21,732,472 confirmed cases and 770,866 deaths in more than 160 countries (WHO, 2020). In Africa, 1,085,589 confirmed cases and 24,606 deaths have been recorded, (WHO, 2020, p.14). However, while some countries appear to be adapting and responding better, most African countries including Sierra Leone – are grappling with the means to adapt and respond to the outbreak (UNICEF, 2020).

The situation in Sierra Leone is severe (Ministry of Finance, 2020). Since the first reported case in Sierra Leone on 31 March 2020, the number of infections has grown from one reported case in 31 March 2020, to 2,315 confirmed cases, with 1,743 recoveries, and 73 deaths as of 14 October 2020 (NACOVERC, Daily Media Update 2020). The outbreak in Sierra Leone has seen hotspots in areas such as Freetown, Portloko and Kenema districts.

To curb the spread of the COVID-19 disease in Sierra Leone, the go-vernment has instituted wide-ranging measures including movement/travel restrictions, night-time curfews, the banning of large gatherings and social distancing. These measures had swift and dramatic social and economic consequences for all sectors of society, including the civil society sector. CSOs have a long tradition of performing fundamental developmental, humanitarian, educational, and advocacy functions across Sierra Leone, often under difficult circumstances. As a result, there cannot be any effective response to COVID-19 in Sierra Leone without the involvement of CSOs. However, at a time when their role and contributions are more essential than ever, they are also confronted with the adverse effects of the pandemic on their operations, programmes, and sustainability. Hence, this research was commissioned and sought to extensively examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on CSOs in Sierra Leone. In doing so, the research sought to examine how the pandemic affected CSOs' operations and the responses adopted to ensure their short-term survival and long-term sustainability. This research was guided by the following key questions:

1. What is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the operations, findings of CSOs and measures employed to mitigate such challenges?
2. To what extent has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted CSOs' funding, resource mobilisation and sustainability and measures utilised to mitigate such challenges?
3. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted CSO-donor relations and strategies used to mitigate such impact?
4. In what ways has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the role and relationship between CSOs and stakeholders and the measures employed to address the gaps and challenges?
5. How have CSOs contributed to the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and what measures have they put in place to be more resilient post COVID-19 in Sierra Leone?
6. What are the lessons, best practices, challenges and opportunities the COVID-19 pandemic presented to CSOs in Sierra Leone?

1.2 Research Methodology

This research was informed by a mixed-methods design involving the use of quantitative and qualitative data. The research was conducted between June and September 2020 and data was primarily collected through the administration of a survey questionnaire with sixty-eight (68) CSOs including 33 non-governmental organisations (NGOs), 29 community-based organisations (CBOs) and 2 (29), unions/coalitions/umbrella bodies. The sample also included 4 faith-based organisations (FBOs), social enterprise organisations (SEOs) and social movements. The sampled CSOs were from Western Area Urban, Western Area Rural, Bombali, Tonkolili, Kenema, Kambia and Bo districts. All of these districts recorded confirmed cases of the COVID-19 pandemic with some people in mandatory quarantine facilities. These districts constitute CSOs' primary areas of operations and programmes across Sierra Leone during the pandemic.

In terms of data collection, this research employed the use of a survey questionnaire using Survey Monkey which was filled by sixty-eight (68) CSOs. A focus group discussion with sixteen (16) CSOs was conducted using Zoom. The 16 CSOs were selected from the initial sample of 68 organisations who participated in the survey. The representatives for the FGDs included Executive

Directors, programme managers or coordinators and board members of participating CSOs. The discussions focused on the impact of COVID-19 on CSOs' operations, programmes, and sustainability. The discussions also included measures taken by CSOs to adapt and respond to the situations and legalities of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sierra Leone.

The research methods complemented data collated through participant observation, key informant interview and a review of relevant published and unpublished literature including reports and papers, official statements, news reports, meeting minutes, and reports from the World Bank, World Health Organisation, United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and on the COVID-19 situation in Sierra Leone and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) that were obtained by the researcher during this research process. The data collected through focus group discussions (FGDs) and survey questionnaires was further complemented by reports and updates compiled and produced by the government of Sierra Leone and CSOs on the impact of COVID-19 on livelihood, and sustainable economic growth and national development.

1.3 Outline of the Report

This report is divided into five sections. The first section introduces and presents the background of the study, outlines the research aims, objectives and specific research questions. It also describes the research methodology. The second section focuses on the review of existing literature and contextual information on the civil society sector in Sierra Leone, the global and national outlook of the COVID-19 pandemic, the role and contributions of CSOs in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. The section also reviews relevant materials on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the operations and programmes of CSOs as well as the strategies CSOs implemented for managing sustainability challenges amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The third section provides detail descriptions of the research methodology with specific emphasis on the research design, analysis of the research population and sampling frame, data collection instruments and data analysis approach for both the quantitative and qualitative data collected. Section four presented and analysed the key findings from the research while the final section concluded and presented the recommendations from the findings.





2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW: CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION





2.1 Overview of the Civil Society Sector in Sierra Leone

The civil society sector in Sierra Leone is growing and it continues to play a significant role in the sustainable socio-economic development process of the country since the 1960s (CIVICUS, 2018). Over the past three decades, religious bodies working in parishes took the lead in stimulating development activities at grassroots level with the active participation of the people (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2014, p.7). Increased awareness of the vital role of CSOs has continued to attract local, private and public donations as well as international donor funding for implementing specific activities throughout the country since the 1970s (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2014, p.7).

Over the years, the CSO sector has developed strong relationships with the media and the communities in which they operate, so that even when their projects elapse, beneficiaries can ensure their continuation (USAID, 2018). For example, Defence for Children International Sierra Leone (DCI-SL) which works to strengthen the national protection and welfare systems for children in Sierra Leone, has over the years established sixteen (16) community girls and young women's advocacy groups "Defence for Girls" to advocate for the rights of girls and young women in communities in Freetown and Moyamba district (DCI-Sierra Leone, 2019). In addition, the National Civil Society Forum setup a network of market women

and Islamic and Christian organisations in Kenema to engage their communities in monitoring health care in various chiefdoms (USAID, 2018).

Most CSOs register with the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC), which lists all registered entities as companies limited by guarantee and does not disaggregate data on CSOs. In 2018, the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (MOFED) (now Ministry of Planning and Economic Development) reported 274 national and international registered CSOs in Sierra Leone (USAID, 2018). Official data from the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development suggests a decrease in the 2018/2019 financial year, as the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development (MOPED), reported 184 registered domestic and international CSOs. Additionally, as of June 2020 in the 2020/2021 financial year¹, only 84 domestic and international CSOs registered with the MOPED.

Of this number, 69 CSOs renewed their registrations, while 16 registered with the MOPED for the first time. This data shows that registered domestic and international CSOs with the MOPED for both renewal and new registration dropped in ranking from 184 in the 2018/2019 financial year to 85 as of June 2020 for the 2020/2021 financial year. According to the Sierra Leone Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (SLANGO) registration of domestic and international CSOs with the institution stands at 292. This shows that there is no comprehensive dataset on the exact number of CSOs operating in Sierra Leone.

The introduction of restrictive regulations under the NGO Policy in 2018 continues to moderately deteriorate the legal environment, organisational capacity and financial viability of the civil society sector in Sierra Leone (USAID, 2018). The new NGO policy provides requirements that effectively allow the government to control CSOs by ensuring that they align their activities and actions with the priorities of the Government of Sierra Leone outlined the COVID-19 preparedness and response plan. CSOs are also challenged by the lack of accountability to themselves for their organisational mission, values, and staff (Ngang, E. 2016), even as they strive to be accountable upward to their funders, governments, international institutions and downward to their beneficiaries and horizontally to their peers (Trivunovic et al., 2011). Moreover, the International Monetary Fund's (IMF's) Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) assessment report states that 'before

¹ Database of the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, 2020-2021

1990, there were civil society movements, but none that were coordinated,' (Sierra Leone PRSP, 2006, p.35-39). The report demonstrated further that 'there were such movements as the Sierra Leone Labour Congress (SLLC), the National Union of Students (NUS), and the Sierra Leone Teachers Union (SLTU). All of these at one time in the political history of Sierra Leone stood up in defense of the interests of their membership. Studies conducted by World Bank Africa Region External Affairs Unit showed that from independence to 1990, the public space necessary for civil society to develop was not only lacking, but also far more restricted, (World Bank, 2007, p59).

2.2 Overview of the COVID-19 Pandemic

2.2.1 Global Outlook

The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the COVID-19 pandemic a public health emergency and a pandemic of international concern (WHO, 2020b) including in Sierra Leone. Globally, as of 14 August 2020, the outbreak has resulted in an estimated 21,732,472 confirmed cases and 770, 866 deaths in more than 160 countries.

2.2.2 Sierra Leone Outlook

Sierra Leone reported the first confirmed case of COVID-19 on 31 March 2020. Since the first reported case, the number of infections increased to 1, 947 confirmed cases, with 1, 502 recoveries, and 69 deaths by 14 August 2020 (NACOVERC, 2020).

After the WHO declared COVID-19 as Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC), on January 30, 2020, the Government of Sierra Leone on 24 March 2020, declared a twelve-month state of public health emergency effective 24 March 2020 with partial lockdown including night curfew from 11 April 2020 to an indefinite date and activated the National Public Health Emergency Operations Center (NPHEOC) at Level 2.

More specifically, the measures adopted by the government included the following: **(i)** conducted two readiness assessments on the national coordination, preparedness and response capacity as per the WHO's standard COVID-19 checklist; **(ii)** convened several Health Inter Ministerial Committee (IMC) meetings for policy and strategic guidance; **(iii)** closure of the three official points of entry (POEs), which are exposed to the highest risk: Freetown International Airport; Gbalamuya (border crossing Sierra Leone and Guinea); and Gendema (border crossing between the Republic of Sierra Leone and the

Republic of Liberia); **(iv)** identified temporary facilities for quarantine, anticipating several travelers from the high risk countries; **(v)** instituted mandatory quarantine for persons with the history of travel to China and other countries with high infection rate within preceding 14 days; **(vi)** revised the mandatory quarantine policy on 2 March 2020 to add Iran, South Korea and Italy to China; **(vii)** developed standard operating procedures (SOPs) and protocols for quarantine, isolation and case management, including Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for Infection Prevention and Control (IPC); and **(viii)** developed a Risk Communication Strategy (RCS), Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials and tailored messages for COVID-19 prevention.

Moreover, the civil society sector has also been encouraged to repurpose their existing programmes and operations to fight COVID-19 in consultation with donor agencies (MoPED, Samba, 2020) and to coordinate with the local governments in the mobilisation of resources, distribution of relief items and the provision of essential services throughout the country (MoPED, 2020). This is very crucial considering the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected Sierra Leone's key sectors including – agricultural sector, mining industry, foreign aid receipts, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs),



handicraft sector (UNICEF, 2020b). However, while government efforts continue to improve, the scale of the problem demands the full cooperation of all stakeholders including CSOs to ensure as many lives as possible are saved and normalcy restored post COVID-19 pandemic era.

2.3 CSOs' Role and Contributions in the Fight Against the COVID-19 Pandemic

Despite the daunting impact of COVID-19 on CSOs' operations, programmes and interventions, they are actively involved in community, district, national, regional and global responses to the pandemic. Since the first reported case of COVID-19 in Sierra Leone, CSOs have respected the preventive measures against the spread of COVID-19 including the lockdown and social distancing protocols. First, the civil society sector in Sierra Leone has created information equality and a wider market for public responses, which is a vital tool to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. CSOs have increased public education and awareness raising campaigns on the COVID-19 pandemic focussing on the basics of hand washing, social distancing rules, signs and symptoms of COVID-19 and the use of facemasks. CSOs have also engaged and mobilised influential local leaders and community members, such as teachers, faith leaders, local leaders, women and men groups, the media and other key stakeholders to disseminate accurate and credible information on disease prevention and containment within their communities. For example, the Sierra Leone SDI Alliance – a network of community-based organisations of the urban poor in Sierra Leone has engaged in multiple community outreach activities, organised community and one-to-one sensitisation, distribution of posters and handbills containing customised messages that respond to the realities of slums and informal settlements and communities around Sierra Leone (Sierra Leone – SDI Alliance, 2020).

Additionally, the civil society sector has built the capacity of key stakeholders including healthcare workers as well as community action and support groups on how to collect and translate evidence, organise community events and develop and produce information, education and communication materials on the signs, symptoms of COVID-19 and actions to be taken to prevent and respond to the situations and realities of the pandemic.

For instance, World Hope International (WHI) and Partners in Health have conducted training of Primary Health Care Unit (PHU) and Community Health Care Workers (CHWs) and local partners on COVID-19 including in disease surveillance and on how to work in vulnerable communities to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sierra Leone. Additionally, Partners in Health (PiH) has conducted training and community engagement with CHWs, clinicians, and community members in Kono district to give them the information they need to protect their health, their families and communities (PiH, 2020).

Moreover, during the COVID-19 outbreak in Sierra Leone, the civil society sector has held both public and private institutions to account, promoting transparency and accountability in the management of public funds including resources used in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, during the implementation of the World Bank's sponsored US\$4 million emergency cash transfer project by the National Commission for Social Action (NaCSA), there were allegations of corruptions and misappropriation in the Bombali district. In holding officials accountable, the African Young Voices (AYV) Television, a local TV station in Sierra Leone documented and circulated testimonies of victims on various mainstream and social media platforms including Facebook and WhatsApp. These media reports attracted the attention of Sierra Leone's Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) which immediately commenced investigation into the issue with five persons taken into police custody to help the ACC with investigation (Sierra Network, 2020). Although public accountability does not completely eliminate corrupt practices, and, indeed sometimes exacerbates it (IMF, 2002), there is evidence that the introduction of social accountability mechanisms into public spending in the last century (World Bank, 2006), has drastically decreased corruption and corrupt practices in the management of public funds during emergency situations especially in Africa, (The World Bank, 2006).

Also, by strengthening public health systems including training of frontline health workers, monitoring stock of key medical supplies, assessing the preparedness of quarantine facilities, provision of social services (Save the Children, 2018), and strategic guidance to national, district and local communities' administrations and responses, CSOs played a leading role in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic. CSOs have mobilised financial resources as



well advocated for and supported government's efforts to build health systems capacity at all levels—such as through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and philanthropic contributions and wider government efforts in the fight against pandemic (MoPED, 2020). For example, while, World Vision in Sierra Leone has donated assorted Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and Infection Prevention Control (IPC) materials worth more than 1 billion Leone to the Ministry of Health and Sanitation, the Coalition of National and International Nongovernmental Organisations (CNINGO) donated over 274 billion Leones to COVID-19 Response package (MoPED, 2020). While these donations seek to complement government's efforts in the fight against COVID-19, the fund seeks to specifically support Sierra Leone's health care system, personal safety, social mobilisation, surveillance, training of health care workers, and the promotion of livelihood support in 16 districts across Sierra Leone (The Sierra Leone Telegraph, 2020).

2.4 Impact of COVID-19 on Civil Society Organisations

CSOs working on the front line to meet the critical needs of citizens have faced unprecedented disruptions to their programmes, operations and interventions due to COVID-19 and its associated legislations such as lockdowns and the restrictions on movement imposed by governments (UNESCO, 2020). In fact, in Sierra Leone, the introduction of physical / social distancing measures by the government, to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has confined civil society and upended their ability to meet, organise, lobby and advocate for both policy and practice change (Bangura, 2020). For instance, the Sierra Leone Child Rights Coalition, and the Girls Advocacy Alliance partners, that advocated for the review of the Child Rights Act, harmonisation of the Child Marriage Laws of Sierra Leone, have been forced to put planned activities on hold and scrambled to shift their work online because of COVID-19 (DCI – Sierra Leone, 2020). More worryingly, some political actors are taking

advantage of the crisis to tighten their political grip by weakening checks and balances, imposing censorship, and expanding state surveillance—all at a time when civil society groups are less able to fight back (Campaign for Good Governance, 2020).

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has also impacted the ability of CSOs to maintain their role, increase service delivery, give voice to vulnerable people and represent impoverished communities (WHO, 2020) which are likely to be left behind in the public health emergency response (UNICEF, 2020, p.10). In Sierra Leone for example, COVID-19 had a diverse impact on civil society but mostly included dwindling resources, as the contributions that allow them to work on behalf of the public dwindled. This stemmed mainly from the widespread economic crisis associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Foundation for Integrated Development- Sierra Leone (FID/SL), a CBO that has been working on health, water and sanitation closed down some of its offices, dismissed some employees, and reduced or cancelled existing programmes, operations and services (e.g. trainings, workshops and campaigns) because the organisation lacked funding opportunities due to COVID-19².

Also, the pandemic has resulted in the collapse of CSOs in many countries including Sierra Leone (UNESCO, 2020). Despite an increased demand for services from the vulnerable people and communities, a majority of CSOs had to reduce or cancel their programmes and interventions (WHO, 2020a). On one hand, the role and contribution from CSOs has declined since their source of funding has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and there remained no alternative source of domestic funding and resource mobilisation initiatives to complement international donor support. For example, Children and Youth for Peace Agency – Sierra Leone (CYPA - Sierra Leone), a CBO that promotes human rights in rural communities in Sierra Leone, cancelled some

² This is according to data from survey questionnaires administered by this research to 68 CSOs, on the impact of COVID-19 on CSOs in Sierra Leone, 2020



of its activities and laid off some employees because of lack of funding opportunities. Also, an organisation like Defence for Children International Sierra Leone who own a computer School in Kenema district, has been significantly impacted by the lockdown and social distancing rules and did not have the means to pay their monthly or annual contributions to fund the organisation's programmes and interventions in the district³.

Furthermore, the UNICEF COVID-19 Situation report noted that the space for civil society to advocate and lobby for policy and practice changes has radically shrunk (UNICEF, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has dominated government and media attention (United Nations, 2020) and has also restructured funding opportunities by the funding community to meet emergency needs across the world. This has influenced the donor community to prioritise their direct investment into governments' budgets to cover budget deficits caused by the global crisis. This has reduced the funding share given to CSOs in many countries, which has undermined their capacities to design and implement development programmes and projects for beneficiaries in communities.

For instance, conclusions by the WHO virtual conference on COVID-19 prevention and response revealed that many international donor organisations such as the United Nations (UN), World Bank, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Department for International Development (DfID) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) have redirected funding to support their health systems and emergency funds across countries to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic (WHO, 2020). The United Nations, for example, in March 2020 launched a US \$2 billion coordinated global humanitarian response plan to fight COVID-19 in some of the world's most vulnerable countries in a bid to protect millions of people and stop the virus from circling back around the globe (United Nations, 2020). It has been further noted that having limited funding opportunities has affected the capacities of CSOs that heavily depend on funds from donors (Fernand, 2006). In Sierra Leone, CSOs are highly dependent on donor funding (World Bank, 2020), and have no other sustainable sources of funding for their interventions and programmes.

Finally, with the above situations, the World Bank has stated that national CSOs are faced with the following challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. First, local NGOs may lose their skilled and competent staff. For example, employees whose contracts were suspended or terminated may get new employment and will not return to the same organisations if things improve. Secondly, the termination and suspension of contracts will fuel conflicts between organisations and employees, and in some cases, local NGOs may be taken to court by some employees whose contractual rights have been violated. Thirdly, the COVID-19 pandemic would have a psychological effect on employees, and when work resumes, NGOs will be required to organise psychotherapeutic sessions for their employees, something that will cost extra money to local NGOs. Lastly, when effective work resumes, staff and management at all levels will be stressed by the fast pace of activities to meet delayed deadlines, submit the deliverables to donors, managing of non-cost extensions, seeking new funding opportunities. At this pace, there could be less time for capacity building, mentorship and coaching sessions, and this may cause distress and compromise the quality of work (World Bank, 2020).

³ Ibid



2.5 Civil Society Organisations' Strategies for Managing sustainability challenges amidst COVID-19

The majority of CSOs in Sierra Leone are implementing measures to adapt to the situation, maintain support to beneficiaries and to mitigate sustainability challenges amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in Sierra Leone. The most common measures are:

- Reducing existing programmes and services for beneficiaries and communities;
- Cutting back on administrative expenses including procuring less vital stationaries and equipment;
- Relying on organisational reserves to continue implementing their programmes and operations;
- Working remotely to prevent and contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic while implementing their programmes and interventions in communities at the same time;
- Restricting work plans and reviewing project proposals to capture COVID-19 preventions and responses approaches in Sierra Leone;

- Negotiating with their existing funders to repurpose existing funds to implement activities that will contribute to curb the spread of the Coronavirus; and
- Facilitating adequate supply of soap and water for hand washing, alcohol-based hand sanitiser, face masks, thermometers, and other PPE at facility and community levels (such as tissues or cloth masks to cover faces if disposable face masks are in short supply).

2.6 Conclusion

This section has reviewed existing literature on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on CSOs in Sierra Leone. In particular, this section has examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the operations and sustainability of CSOs. In addition, it explored the practical strategies that CSOs are using to adapt and respond to the uncertainty in their operating environment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure institutional sustainability. However, the section shows the need for CSOs to continue to collaborate with the government, partners, staff and donors to jointly respond of COVID-19 but also implement solutions to deal with existing and future effects from the crisis.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY





3.1 Research design

The research utilised a mixed-method approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques, to generate answers for the research questions as well as to achieve the specific objectives of the research. The primary data were complemented with secondary data. However, the research was largely skewed towards the primary data because of the nature and scope of the research and its thematic compositions. Data collection for this research took place over a six-week period between June and July 2020.

3.2 Population and Sampling Frame

The population of the research was primarily CSOs which included CBOs, SEOs, NGOs, Unions/Coalitions/Umbrella organisations, FBOs and social movements.

The study purposively selected 68 CSOs for their participation. All of these CSOs were either located in the capital city (Freetown), or in the urban, semi urban, and in the rural areas of Sierra Leone. Organisations were selected by two methods. First, snowballing method was employed in selecting the CSOs. The initial contacts of CSOs were provided by the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI). The CSOs were selected from different thematic areas including education, health, disability, democracy and governance, agriculture and food security. The selected CSOs operated at different levels: national, regional, district levels.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

Data collection methods for this research comprised the following: survey questionnaire, desk review, focus group discussions, key informant interviews and participant observation. These are discussed in detail below:

Survey questionnaire – The questionnaire was developed and administered by WACSI in consultation with the researcher for Sierra Leone. The questionnaire comprised forty-seven (47) questions and covered thematic areas such as organisational information, impact of COVID-19 on CSOs' operations and programmes, impact of COVID-19 on CSOs' funding, domestic resource mobilisation and sustainability. This was administered online using Survey Monkey.

Desk review – Another data collection method was desk review of available secondary literature. This included academic and grey literature such as published and unpublished reports and papers, official statements of the Government of Sierra Leone, news reports, media and newspaper publications, meeting minutes, recordings of testimony and other documents were obtained by the researcher. This review provided the researcher with adequate information of the secondary data which gave better context for the primary data gathered from the fieldwork.

Focus group discussions – Focus group discussions (FGDs) was also employed in collecting data. The focus group discussion was conducted with 16 representatives from CSOs including NGOs and CBOs that participated in the survey administration. The representatives included executive directors, programme managers or coordinators and board members. The discussion focused on the impact of COVID-19 on CSOs' operations, programmes, and sustainability. The discussions also included measures taken by CSOs to adapt and respond to the situations and legalities of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sierra Leone. These online discussions were guided by seventeen (17) key questions developed by the researcher in consultation with WACSI. The FGDs were recorded with the consent of all participants. These were later transcribed and analysed by the researcher.

Participant observation – This method was used by the researcher, as an activist who works within the sector in the country. The researcher keenly observed the evolution of the pandemic in Sierra Leone and its impact on CSOs as well as how the organisations are responding to ensure their sustainability.

Key informant interview – This method was used by the researcher to interview selected CSO respondents on the situation and context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sierra Leone and how it has impacted on the work of CSOs in Sierra Leone.

3.4 Data Analysis

The quantitative data from the survey questionnaire was analysed using Microsoft Excel. On the other hand, the qualitative data were subjected to content analysis to identify emerging themes and patterns in the data. The quantitative and qualitative data were integrated in the final analysis.



4.0 KEY FINDINGS





This section presents an analysis and interpretation of the findings from the study.

4.1 Overview / Landscape of CSOs Surveyed

4.1.1 Description of Organisations

Figure 1 presents the findings on the types of CSOs that participated in this study. The results indicate that 49% of CSOs were NGOs while CBOs constituted 43%. Other forms of CSOs such as FBOs, social enterprises and social movements also constituted 4% of the sampled CSOs (See Figure 1 below).

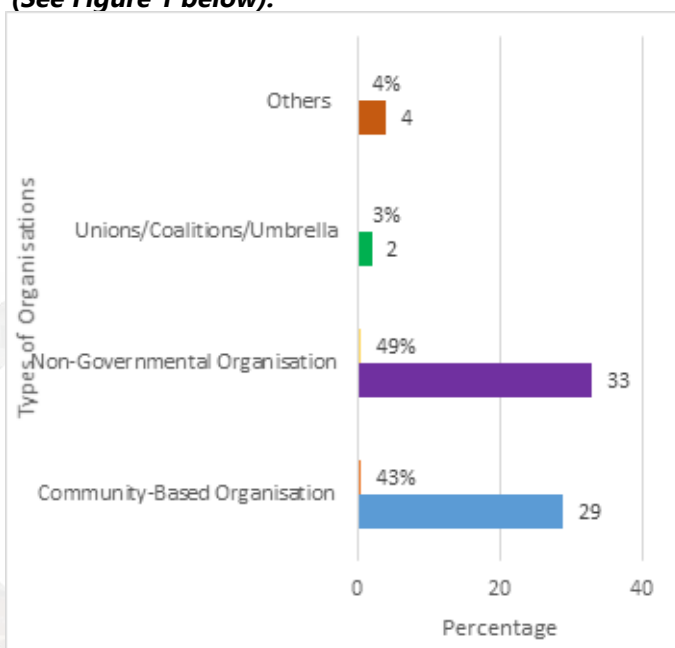


Figure 1: Types of organisations

4.1.2 Existence of CSOs

The results show that majority of the sampled CSOs (44%) had been in existence between 6 and 10 years while only 4% had been in existence for 21 years and above.

This indicates that the recent years have seen a boom in the number of CSOs operating in Sierra Leone (see Figure 2 below).

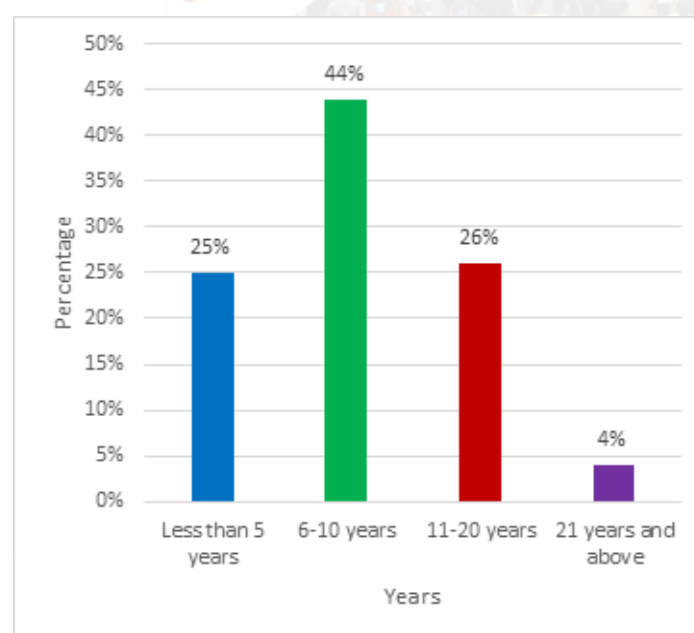


Figure 2: Existence of CSOs

4.1.3 Staff size of CSOs

Figure 3 presents the findings on the number of staff of CSOs that participated in the study. The results indicate that 12% of the CSOs employed 11-20 staff, while 46% employed 1-5 staff and 10% employed 21-40 staff. Also, while 1% of CSOs that participated in the study employed 41-60 staff, 26% employed 6-10 staff. The results additionally show that only 1% employed between 61-100 staff while another 1% employed above 100 staff (see Figure 3 below).

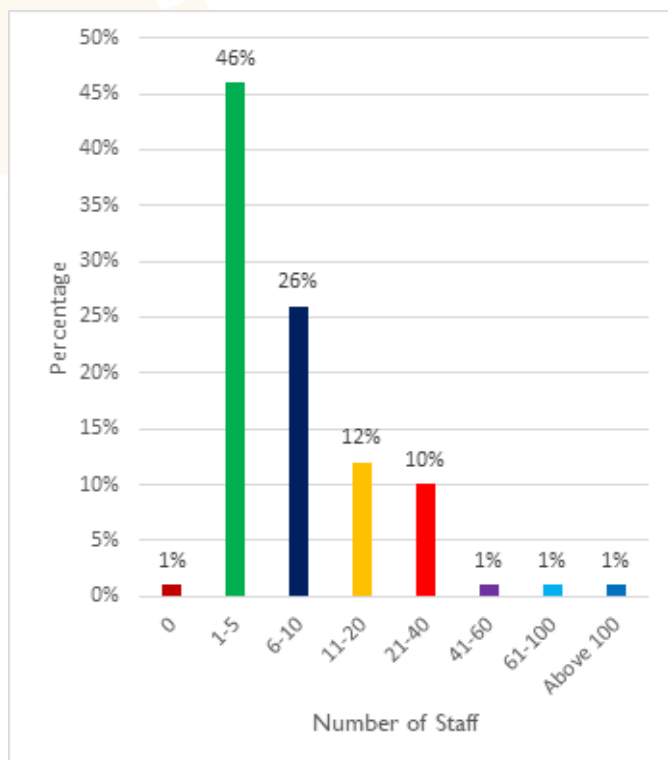


Figure 3: Number of staff

4.1.4 Current Annual Budget

Figure 4 presents the annual budget of the sampled CSOs. The results show that 37% of CSOs had an annual budget of less than US\$5000. Only a small percentage (9%) had a budget size of above US\$500,000. The results demonstrate that majority of the sampled operated on a small annual budget which is a demonstration of their organisational size measured in terms of annual budget (see figure 4 below).

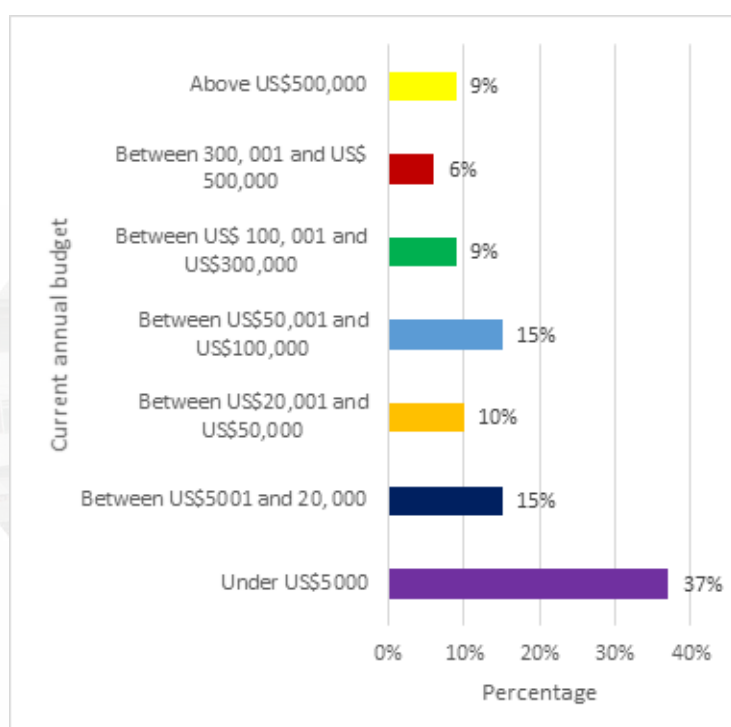


Figure 4: Current annual budget

4.2 Impact of the COVID-19 on CSOs

This section presents the findings and an analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic on the operations, programmes, funding, resource mobilisation and sustainability of CSOs. It also explores their relationship with donors and other stakeholders.

4.2.1 Impact of the COVID-19 on the operations and programmes of CSOs

The results from this study indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has both a short-term (1-3 months) and a long-term impact on the operations and programmes of CSOs in Sierra Leone. In terms of short-term impact, about 16% of CSOs reported that they cancelled their meetings, conferences and travels both national and international while 17% also indicated that they reduced or cancelled their operations (see Figure 5 below). A section of CSOs (17%) and 11% also reported that they could not meet the expectations of their beneficiaries because of the restrictions on staff movement and reduced staff strength, respectively. The results demonstrate that restriction of movement and public gathering, a key programmatic element for CSOs, caused the cessation of fieldwork and increased respondents' inability to have community interactions with beneficiaries.

Despite the inability of CSOs to meet the needs of their beneficiaries due to the restrictions imposed by COVID-19, a small number of CSOs (8%) reported that an increased demand for their services by beneficiaries. Interestingly, the results show that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected CSOs' access to funding and organisational costs as 12% and 6% reported such cases, respectively.

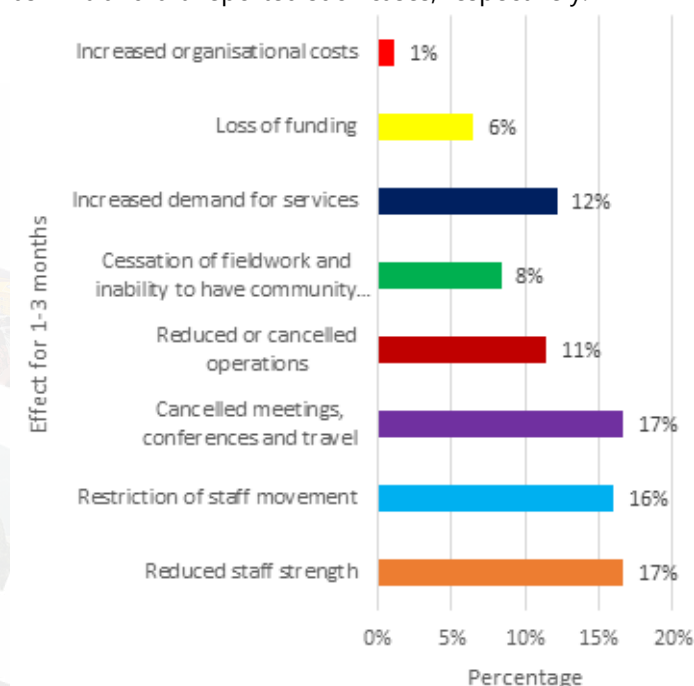


Figure 5: Short-term effects of COVID-19 (1-3months)

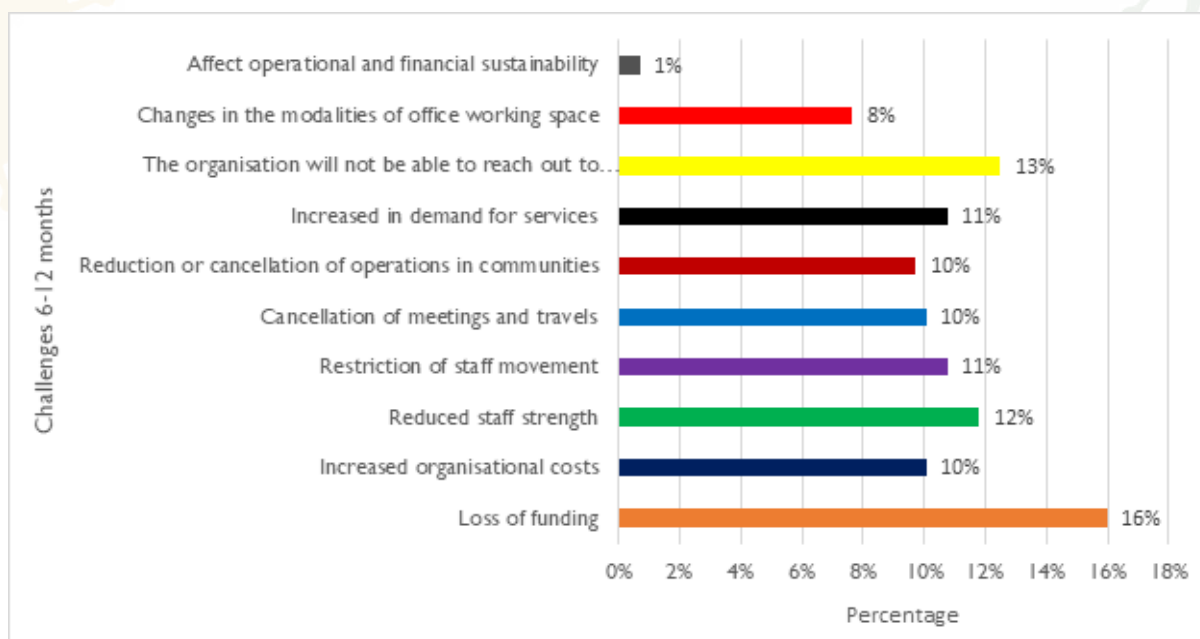


Figure 6: Long-term effects of COVID-19 (6-12 months)

Figure 6 below presents the findings on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the operations and programmes of CSOs that participated in the study for the next 6-12 months. The results show that 16% of respondent CSOs fear they will lose funding, while 10% anticipate they will experience increased organisational cost and 12% are afraid that they might be faced with a reduced staff strength in the next 6-12 months. In addition, whereas 11% of the respondents expect their CSOs to still experience restriction of staff movement, 10% are of the view that they will witness cancellation of meetings and travels. Another 10% of respondents indicate that their CSOs will experience reduction or cancellation of operations in communities.

13% of the respondents revealed that their organisations will not be able to reach out to constituents on regular basis. Only 8% of the CSOs that participated in the study indicated that there will be change in the modalities of office working space and another 1% reported that the COVID-19 pandemic will affect the operational and financial sustainability of their organisations in the next 6-12 months (see figure 6 below). However, some respondents expressed optimism about the impact of COVID-19 on their organisations. 11% believe that they will experience an increase in the demand for their services (see figure 6).

4.2.1.1 Long-term Impact of COVID-19 on CSOs (6-12 months)

Other negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic stated by respondents during the FGDs, included: slowdown of interventions in communities, limited

donor support, change in donor priorities, inability of CSOs to visit communities to understand the issues affecting beneficiaries and communities, cancellation of project proposals, staff working without salaries, a halt in planned programmes and activities schedules. For instance, the representative of Network Movement for Justice and Development (NMJD) during the focus group discussion indicated that the organisation had to cancel a planned national land conference as part of their land governance programme that could have assembled 300 – 400 stakeholders to address land rights issues in Sierra Leone. Also, the lobby and advocacy efforts of NMJD to enact two land laws: Customary Land Rights Law and National Land Formation Law was never materialised because of the COVID-19 pandemic. One respondent described the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their programmes and operations in these terms:

“the COVID-19 pandemic came as a shock for us as an organisation and it was difficult to mobilise our resources to get onto our beneficiaries, who are mostly girls to be able to protect themselves from violence and sexual violence issues. We will be negatively affected by coronavirus for the foreseeable future. Even when the crisis subsides, we will not be able to pick up where we left off”

4.2.1.3 Challenges of CSOs Working Remotely

The results show that most of the CSOs that participated in the study experienced challenges in working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study results indicate

4 Focus Group Discussion, CSO representative, 27 July 2020

that 52% of the CSOs did not have the resources and capacity to work remotely, while 25% indicated that there are no clearly defined policies for working remotely in their organisations. Meanwhile, 14% indicated that most of their staff are not used to the modalities of working remotely. Further, 5% pointed out that the nature of the organisation's work does not allow staff to work remotely. Moreover, while 2% of respondents indicated that they experienced no challenges with working remotely, 2% stated that despite the outlined social distancing protocols, they had to reach out to their beneficiaries especially since domestic violence are on the rise during this pandemic (**See figure 7 below**).

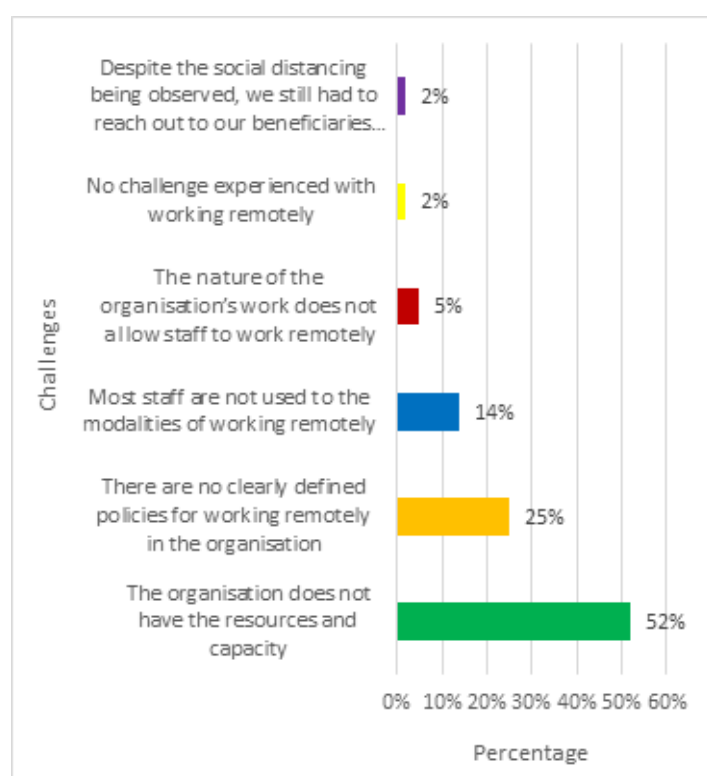


Figure 7: Challenges working remotely

On working remotely, an activist observed that:

*"We have reduced the number of staff coming to the office for work per day. We work by shift, while 50% work in office, the other 50% work from home and we use email to communicate and make our work easier and we do zoom meetings. We follow the measures put in place by our Government including use of face mask, hand wash and social distance in (our) workplace. Staff not feeling well should stay home till they are fully recovered. The number of our client we contact per session has also been reduced and all Government prevention protocols are observed."*⁵

⁵ Focus group discussion, CSO representative, 27 July, 2020

4.2.2 Impact of the COVID-19 on funding, domestic resource mobilisation and sustainability

Figure 8 presents the finding on the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on the funding of CSOs that participated in the study. The results show that 26% of CSOs experienced delayed or reduced funding from donors, while 57% indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic caused funding restrictions and constrains for their entities. Also, the result from the finding shows that 4% of participant CSOs experienced increased funding allocations, whereas 12% indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic provided opportunities for mobilisation of domestic/alternative resources (**See figure 8 below**).

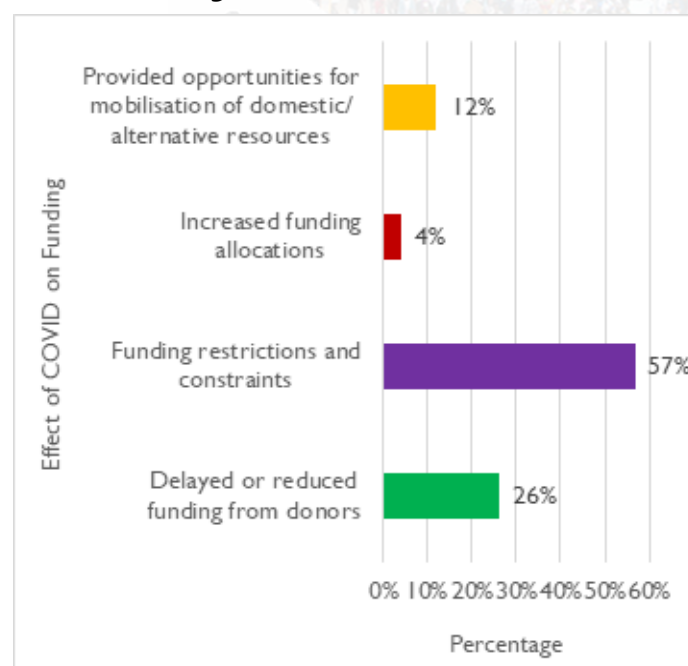


Figure 8: Effect of COVID-19 on CSOs funding

Although COVID-19 had a significantly negative effect on CSOs' funding, there were also some positive aspects of the pandemic for CSOs. For instance, and as shown in figure 7 above, 4% of the sampled CSOs reported an increase in their funding allocations while 12% highlighted that the pandemic provided them with unique opportunities to mobilise domestic or alternative resources to continue with their programmes and interventions in communities. Amongst the 12% of CSOs that reported to have mobilised domestic resources to support their organisations' operations and programmes in communities, 46% comes from community and volunteer support, 29% from individual donations, while 11% comes from government funding, 3% comes from local private funding and other 3% comes through partnership with other organisations. For this reason, it could be argued that the COVID-19 pandemic has also presented opportunities for CSOs in terms of their domestic resource mobilisation (**See figure 9**).

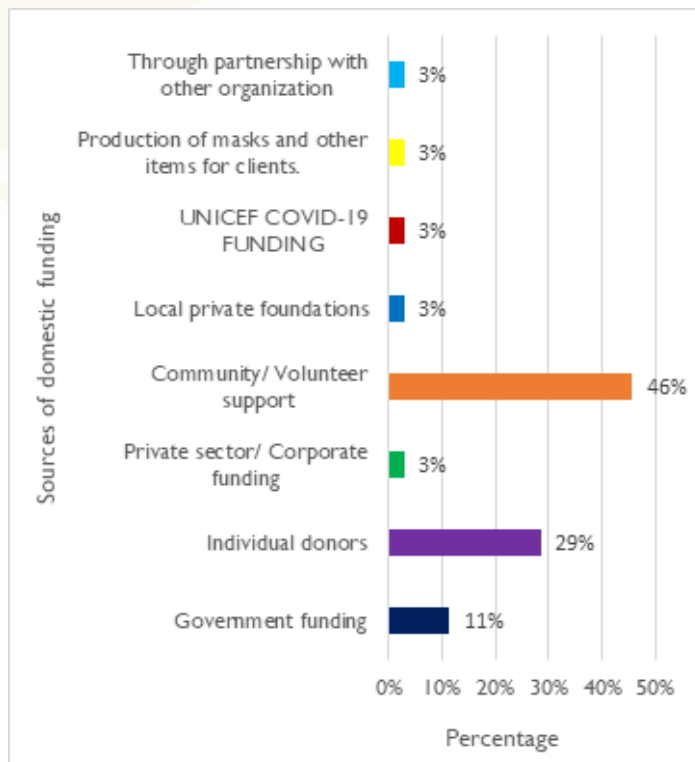


Figure 9: Sources of domestic funding

In fact, during the FGD, some CSOs explained that they received funding from their traditional donors even though they had adjusted their budgets cost to capture and implement COVID-19 related activities within communities. Speaking about the positive aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Sierra Leonean CSOs one CSO rep stated that:

*“The COVID-19 pandemic has been a blessing in disguise for us because organisations have already funded some of our key programmes and activities including trainings, capacity building and community and media awareness raising campaigns in Kambia district.”*⁶

The resources an organisation possesses, particularly its financial resources, is a key determinant of the sustainability of CSOs (WACSI, 2015). With COVID-19 taking a significant toll on the resource mobilisation potential of CSOs in Sierra Leone, it becomes important to examine the extent to which the sustainability of CSOs is affected by the pandemic.

Figure 10 presents the results on the effects of the COVID-19 on CSOs' sustainability. The results indicate that about 63% of CSOs reported that the pandemic will negatively affect the sustainability of the civil society sector in Sierra Leone to a very high extent. Interestingly, only 3% of CSOs expressed a neutral view while 9% felt that to

a low extent the pandemic will affect the sustainability of the CSO sector. Among the possible reasons that could have accounted for this was that loss of funding and increase in demand for services. Overall, there were mixed responses on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the funding, resource mobilisation and sustainability of their organisations (**See figure 10**).

4.2.3 Impact of COVID-19 on CSOs Donor-Relations

Proactive and ongoing communication with both internal and external stakeholders is critical to how CSOs manage and overcome the impact of COVID-19. The results indicate that about 54% of CSOs reported that their donors had informed them that the immediate and projected impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their ability to continue supporting their programmes, activities and operations. For instance, during the focus group discussion, a child centred CSO described their relations with donors during the pandemic as:

*“Positive and we are in constant communication with our donors. We even give them weekly update on the COVID-19 situation in Sierra Leone. In fact, one of our donors, ‘Child to Child’ increased our budgetary support so that we can cover staff salaries thereby preventing further disaster because we had wanted to dismiss some staff because of the financial implication of the COVID-19 pandemic on our organisation.”*⁷

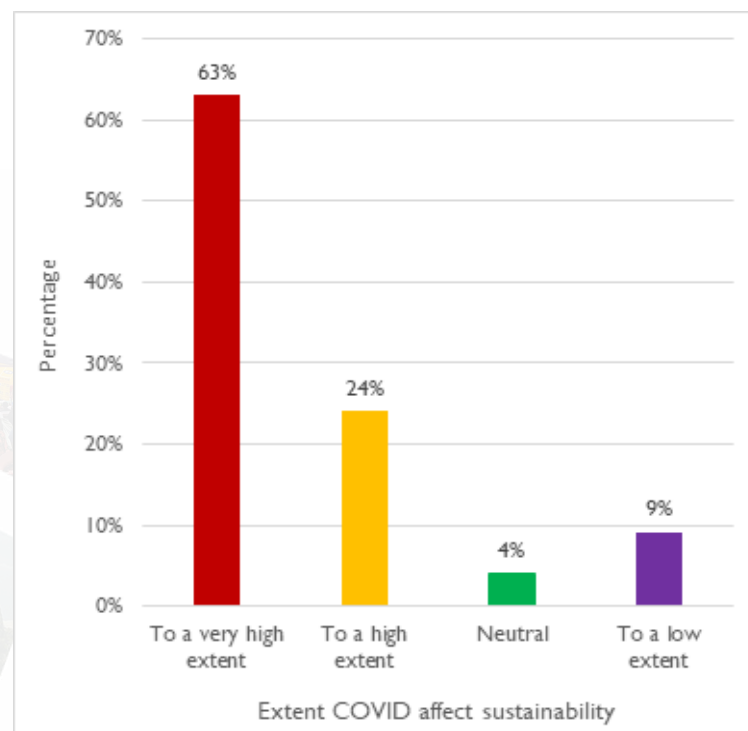


Figure 10: Impact of COVID-19 on CSOs' sustainability

⁶ Focus Group Discussion, CSO representative, 27 July 2020

⁷ Focus Group Discussion, CSO representative, 27 July 2020

On the other hand, 46% of CSOs also indicated that they had not communicated with their donors since the onset of the pandemic. When asked whether donors could change their priorities after the pandemic due to the imminent impact of the crisis, 51% of CSOs reported that they neither disagreed nor agreed while 12% reported that they disagreed that their donors would change their priorities after the COVID-19 pandemic in Sierra Leone. Accordingly, the research findings demonstrate that the majority of CSOs and their representatives were not very diligent in communicating with their donors during the pandemic. For instance, majority CSOs (43%) indicated that they had not discussed anything with their donors with regards the impact of the COVID-19 on their programmes, interventions or operations. However, 32% of CSOs stated that they had engaged their donors on the possibilities of extending project completions deadline, cancellation of project activities (**See figure 11**).

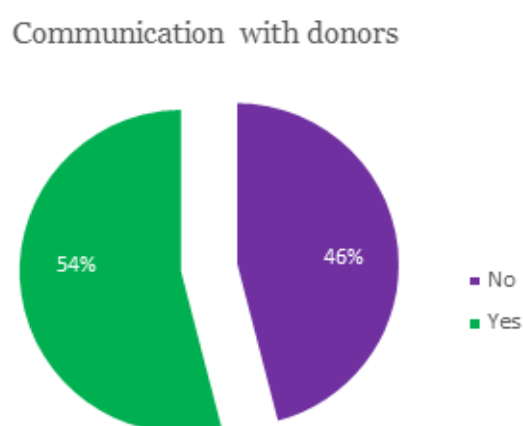


Figure 11: Impact of Communication with donors

Apparently, figure 12 presents findings on donors' flexibility during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results show that a small proportion of CSOs (19%) reported that their donors were not flexible to their needs while the majority of CSOs (41%) (i.e. very flexible and extremely) believed that their donors provided some flexibility during the COVID-19 pandemic. This notwithstanding, 31% of CSOs thought that their donors were neither flexible nor not flexible to their needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

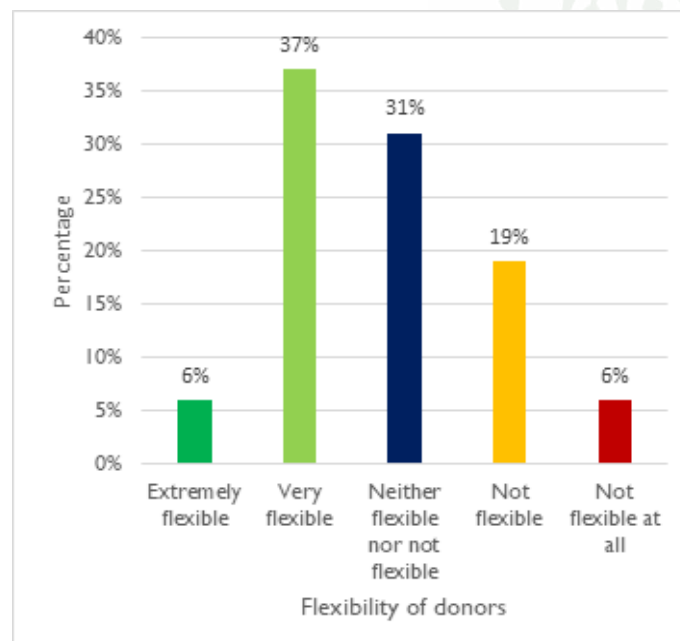


Figure 12: Flexibility of donors

4.2.3.1 Support Assistance CSOs Need from their Donors

The results from figure 13 show that all the CSOs that participated in the study needed support or assistance from donors and stakeholders to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on their organisations' operations and programmes. The results show that 16% of CSOs expressed the need for donors and stakeholders to reevaluate their fundraising strategies, while 13% need help on financial scenario planning. Also, while 12% indicated the need for human resource management while another 12% indicated the need for volunteer recruitment and management. A majority of the respondents (18%) indicated the need for technology support from donors and stakeholders to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their programmes and operations. The evident need for technology support by CSOs has been exacerbated by the pandemic (see figure 13 below).

4.2.4 Impact of the COVID-19 on CSOs' Role and Relationship with Stakeholders

Figure 14 presents the findings on the programme and project sustainability of the sampled CSOs after COVID-19 pandemic in Sierra Leone. The study results indicate that the majority of CSOs (47%) and 25% reported that they agreed and strongly agreed respectively that their intended beneficiaries could support their operations after the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, only a small percentage of CSOs (24%) neither disagreed nor agreed that their intended beneficiaries could help in sustaining their activities after the COVID-19.

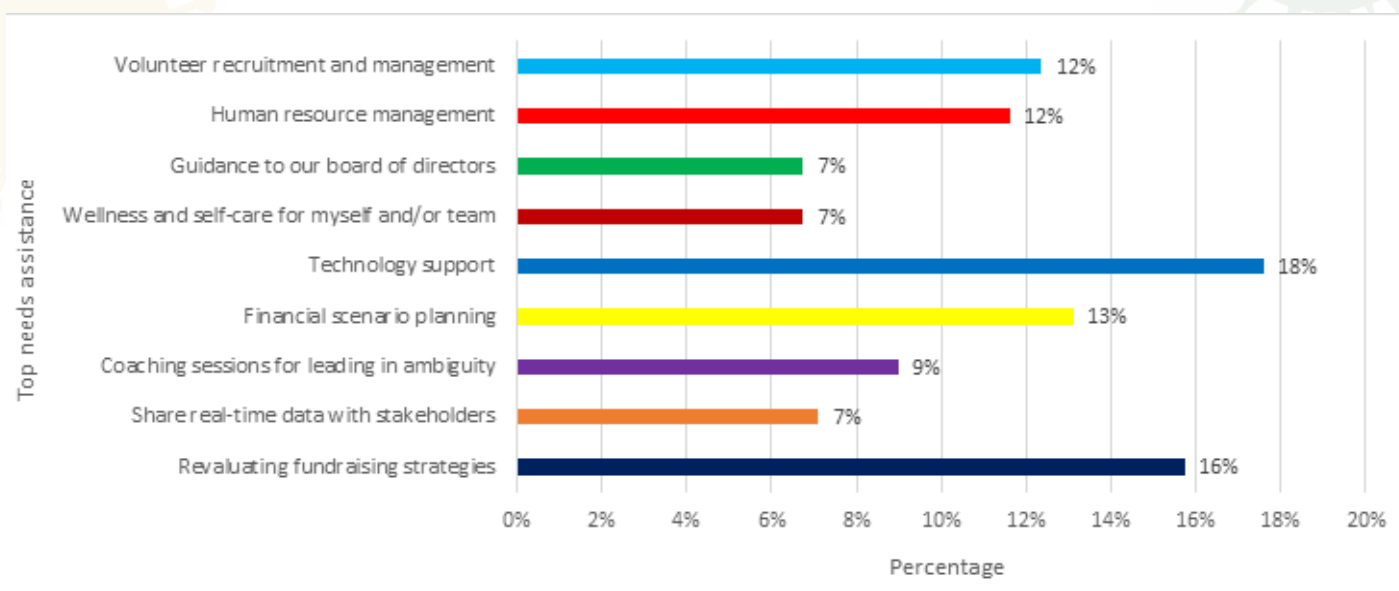


Figure 13: Top support assistance

The study results therefore shows high level of certainty amongst CSOs that participated in the study that their project activities could be sustained by intended beneficiaries after the COVID-19 pandemic in Sierra Leone. It also shows that many CSOs continue to engage their beneficiaries and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic in Sierra Leone (see figure 14 below).

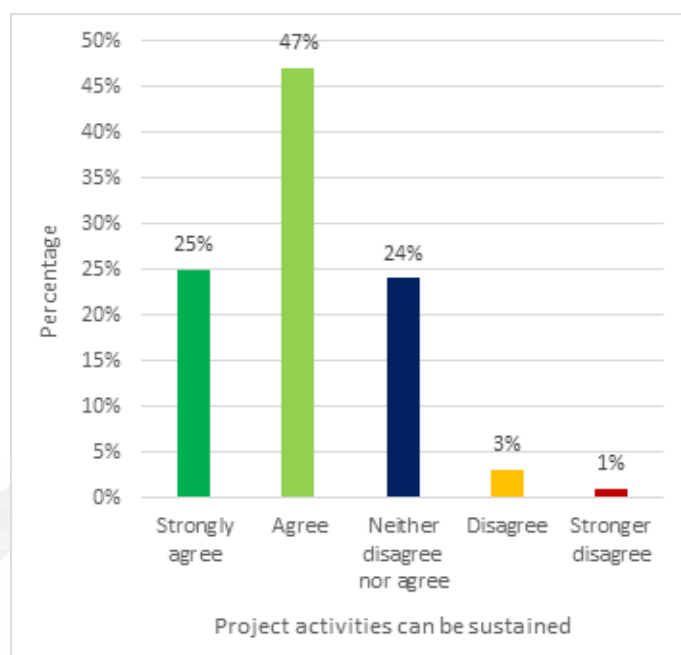


Figure 14: Sustainability of project activities

Figure 15 below presents the results on the specific activities undertaken by CSOs during the pandemic for their intended beneficiaries. It shows that 47% of CSOs had undertaken advocacy and community education, while 27% engaged in coordinating donations and support for vulnerable in society. Also, 19% of CSOs indicates that they engaged in data gathering and information sharing (see figure 15).

Apart from this, during the focus groups discussions, some CSO representatives explained that they undertook emergency responses such as the distribution of food and hygiene products and also coordinated and facilitated CSO involvement and training of community stakeholders on COVID-19. Other advocacy specific interventions included highlighting human rights abuses, ensuring transparency, engagement in outreaches and publicity related work such as the distribution of IEC materials, radio discussion and dialogue sessions and other specific activities undertaken to support communities. During the focus group discussion, one CSO representative outlined the activities and initiatives that they had implemented to strengthen their relationship with their beneficiaries and stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic:

"We mobilised resources individually and collaborated with other child protection agencies to provide services to children during the COVID-19 pandemic. We organised community dialogue meetings in different communities and engaging girls on protective tips including on how to protect themselves during a pandemic and also how they can help to engage other girls to speak out and be able to protect themselves from sexual abuses and related protection issues. We also [participated] in radio discussion talks facilitated by girls on issues affecting girls in communities".

Another participant indicated that:

"When the COVID-19 came, we tapped from our experiences from Ebola. We used our paralegals to sensitise our people about the rules and regulations

of the COVID-19. We did an assignment and produced a report that was shared by the District Health Management Team in Kailahun and by extension to the Ministry of Health⁸”.

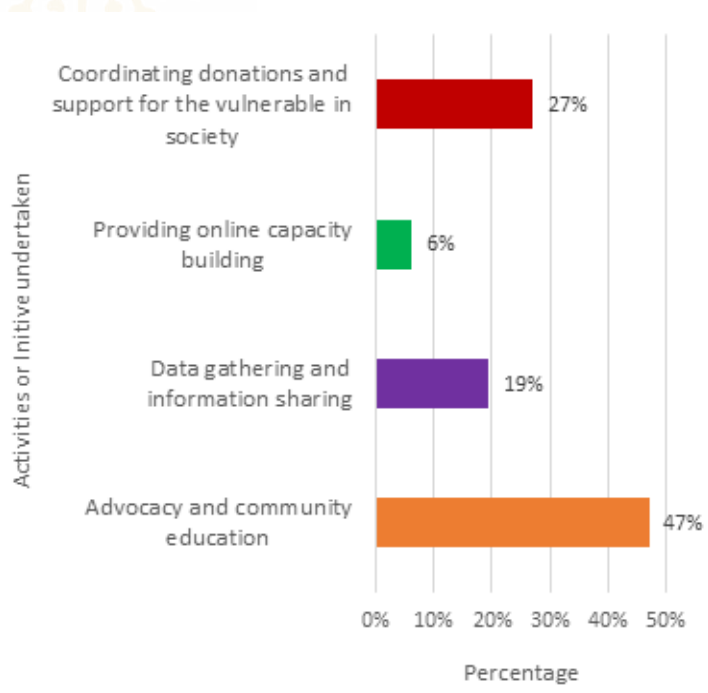


Figure 15: Activities undertaken by CSOs

4.3 CSOs' Responses and Strategies to COVID-19 to ensure their Survival and Sustainability

Despite the challenges experienced by CSOs in Sierra Leone, they are finding ways to mitigate the impact and existential threats imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure their survival and sustainability. This section presents an analysis and interpretation of the various responses and strategies implemented by CSOs to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.3.1 Strategies to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on CSOs' operations and programmes

Figure 16 presents the strategies implemented by CSOs who participated in the study to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their programmes and interventions. The results show that 35% of CSOs reduced existing programmes and services, while 27% indicated that they cut-back on administrative expenses. In addition, the results indicate that 17% of CSOs relied more on digital technologies to mitigate the effect of COVID-19 on their programmes and operations. Only a small section of CSOs (8%) reported that they relied on organisational reserves (see figure 16).

The research also revealed that a substantial number of CSOs (78%) reported that they introduced and implemented remote working policies as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Interestingly, working from home provided CSOs with a mechanism to continue at least some of their operations, programmes and activities.

Despite CSOs' resilience in the face of the crisis, demonstrated by the above-mentioned coping mechanisms, the results from figure 15 show that 47% of CSOs agreed while 20% disagreed that they were adequately prepared to adapt and cope with the negative implications and disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic on their operations and programmes (see figure 17).

The results additionally reveal that CSOs adopted other responses and measures to cope with the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Most importantly, CSOs continued to implement some of their traditional programmes. They conducted assessments and shared key findings on COVID-19, mainstreamed COVID-19 interventions into their programmes and engaged in massive sensitisation and community awareness raising sessions on COVID-19 and related issues in communities. One respondent observed that:

“ we use our paralegals to sensitise and provide services to the people in border communities about the rules and regulations on the COVID-19 pandemic. We also conducted assessments on the situation of COVID-19 and how it affects communities and provided reports with recommendations on the situations of the COVID-19 at district levels⁹”.

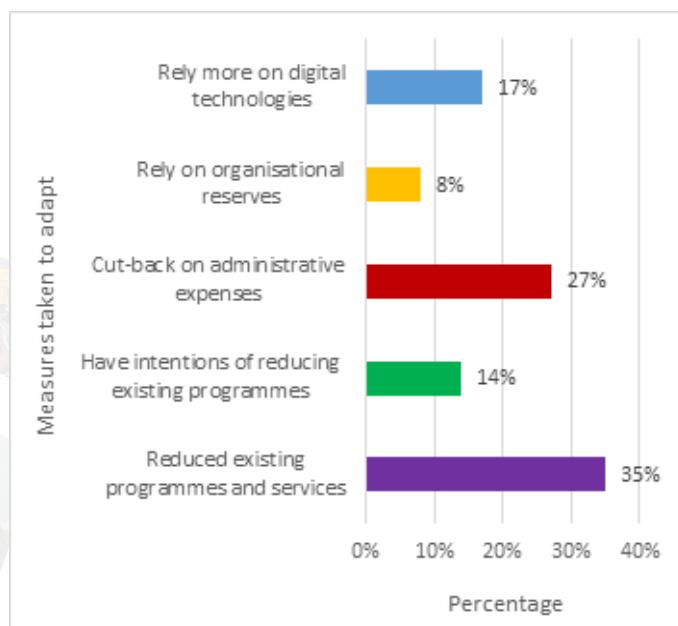


Figure 16: Measures taken by CSOs to adapt and cope

⁸ Focus Group Discussion, CSO representative, 27 July 2020

⁹ Interview, 18 September 2020

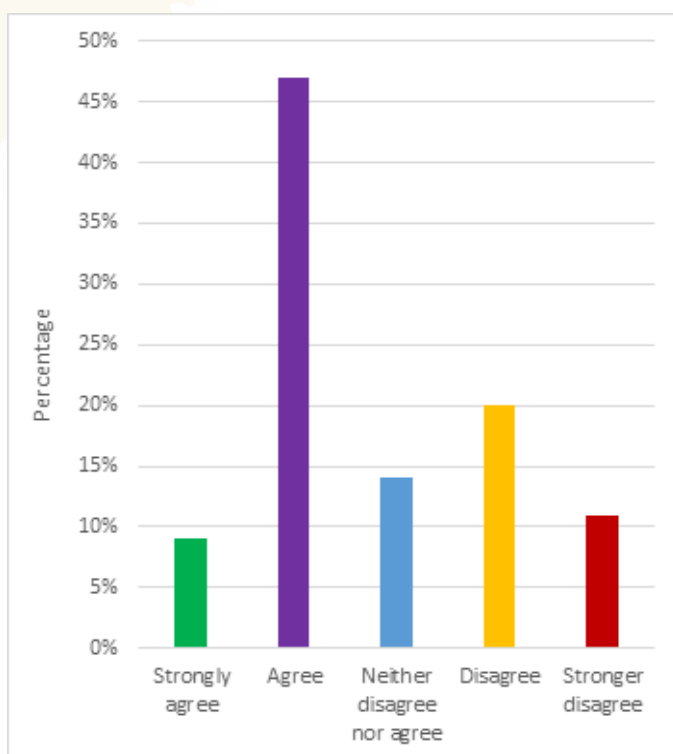


Figure 17: Organisations preparedness to adapt

Another respondent indicated that:

“We redesigned all our programmes towards the COVID-19 fights and fortunately for us, our donors were understanding and approved our proposals and from then we went into actions in communities with direct support, and awareness raising on the COVID-19 prevention and response.”¹⁰

4.3.2 Strategies to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 on funding

Given the loss of funding, limited domestic resource mobilisation initiatives, insecurity and uncertainty about future funding, and increased costs, the study's findings revealed that all of the respondents had introduced and implemented some measures to reduce costs and mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their funding. The findings from this research suggest that about 62% of CSOs continued to receive funding from a range sources to mitigate the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on funding. Also, diversification of funding sources was one of the key strategies employed by CSOs during the pandemic. For instance, 35% of CSOs reported that they had secured funding from international NGOs while 20% also received funding from philanthropic and grant-making foundation. CSOs that reported mobilising individual donations also constituted about 19%. Another important strategy employed by CSOs was their reliance on organisational reserves to self-fund their activities

related to the COVID-19. In fact, the results indicate that 11% of CSOs who participated in the study relied on their organisational reserves during the pandemic (see figure 18). Unfortunately, it was reported that the reserves could only sustain their operations, programmes and activities for the next 6 – 12 months. This means that domestic resources could serve as alternative resource mobilisation routes for CSOs to ensure their sustainability in the absence of donor funding if well developed (see figure 18 below).

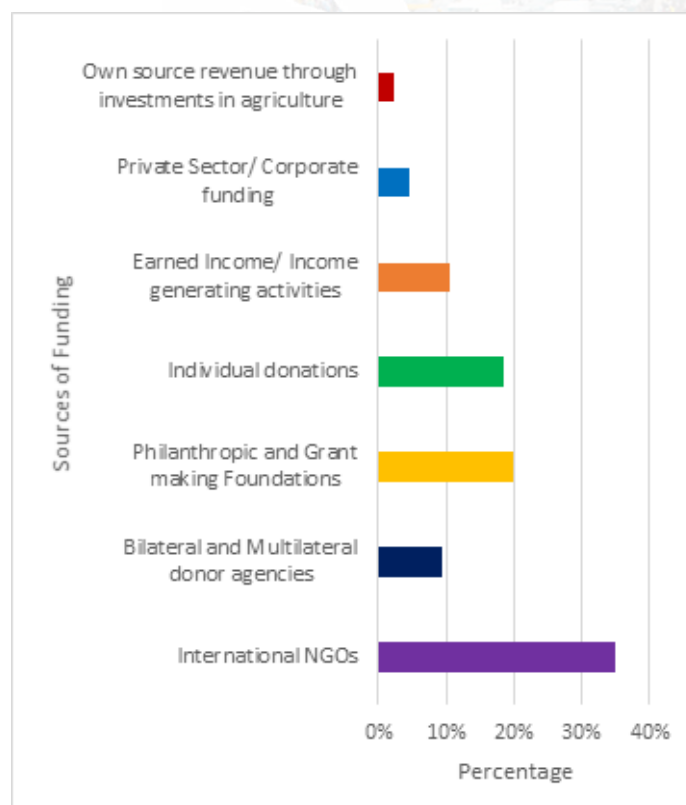


Figure 18: Sources of funding

Apart from the reliance on organisational reserves, the research findings indicate that CSOs mobilised domestic resources to complement external donor funding in supporting their activities during the pandemic. Also, 46% of the funding was from community or volunteer support, while 29% came from individual donors. Only 10% was contributed by the government of Sierra Leone followed by 3% by private sector/corporate funding, local private foundations, production of other items for clients and partnership with other organisations accounting for 3%. Speaking in an interview with the researcher, about the importance of domestic resource mobilisation as a strategy employed by CSOs during the pandemic, a civil society actor explained that:

¹⁰ Interview, 18 September 2020

“Domestic resource mobilisation helped us immensely to continue implementing our programmes and operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. We have been able to use innovative approach[es] to tap into community [re]sources, promote community ownership and sustainability of our programmes, and inclusion of community stakeholders into our programmes.”¹¹

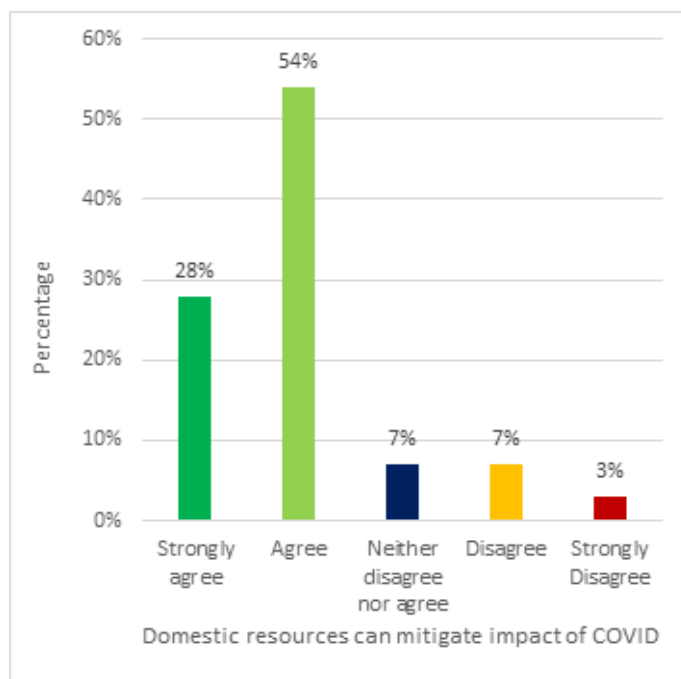


Figure 19: Domestic resources can mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on funding

As shown in figure 19 above, when asked about the potential of domestic resources to help in mitigating the negative impact of the pandemic on their organisations, more than half of the sampled CSOs (54%) responded in the affirmative that domestic resources would help in addressing the impact of COVID-19 on their organisations and programmes. Only 7% of CSOs disagreed followed by 6% that strongly disagreed that domestic resource mobilisations could help in mitigating the negative impact of the pandemic on their organisations' programmes and interventions. Other measures taken by CSOs included cost-cutting measures which revolved around reducing or cancelling programme activities, shifting organisational priorities, putting a stop to the hiring of staff, reducing salaries and working hours as well as increasing volunteer support. In addition, other CSOs resorted to renegotiating contracts with key staff and volunteers, repurposing budget allocations to include COVID-19 prevention and response efforts, increasing collaboration with other CSOs to apply for funding. Some participants in the focus group discussion elucidated on this:

“The pandemic represents one of the most challenging periods in the history of our operations in Sierra Leone and we have responded promptly by implementing wide-ranging measures to reduce costs. Our field staff and management team have volunteered [to take] pay cuts and we have suspended some of our activities for beneficiaries in communities.”¹²

4.3.3 Strategies for Mitigating the Effects of COVID-19 on Donor-Relations and CSOs role and Relationship with Stakeholders.

4.3.3.1 Communication with Funders/Donors

The results derived from this research indicate that 54% of CSOs had been informed by their donors while 46% reported that they had not received any communication from their donors that COVID-19 might impact their ability to continue supporting their programmes and operations in communities. For CSOs that had communicated with donors, when asked whether their donors would change their priorities on programmes and interventions because of the pandemic, 21% of the CSOs reported that they agreed their donors would not change their priorities. Unfortunately, 24% of CSOs neither disagreed nor agreed that their donors would change their priorities on programmes and interventions even after the COVID-19 pandemic (see figure 20 below).

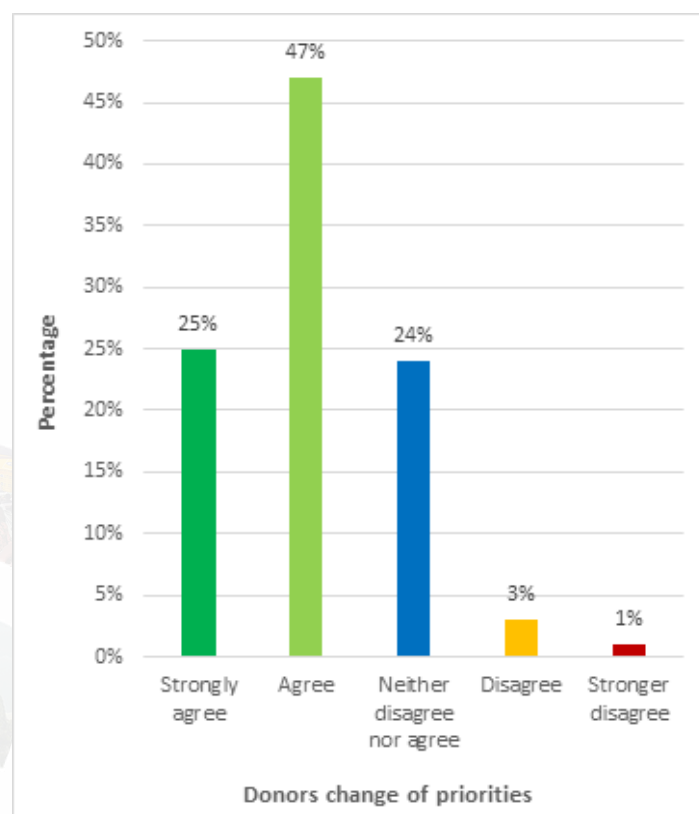


Figure 20: Donors' change of priorities

¹¹ Interview, 18 September 2020

¹² Focus Group Discussion, CSO representative, 27 July 2020

Apart from the survey results, during CSOs also identified an increased in communication channels with their donors during the focus group discussions. In fact, 37% of CSOs reported that they remained optimistic of the flexibility of donors towards their programmes and interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, while, 19% of CSOs indicated that their donors are not flexible, 31% of CSOs held the view that their donors were neither flexible nor not flexible with regards to the needs of your organisation during the COVID-19 pandemic in Sierra Leone (See figure 21 below).

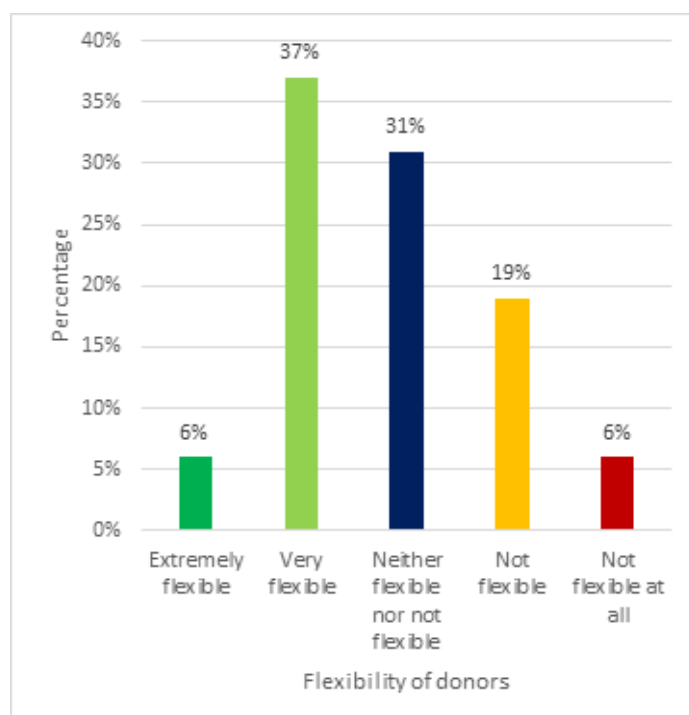


Figure 21: Flexibility of donors

In terms of the instruments used by CSOs in communicating to their donors, none of the sampled CSOs reported using traditional means of communication (i.e. phone calls, videos on activities, emails and websites) to improve on their relations with donors especially during the pandemic. However, the majority reported that they resorted to using other means such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Zoom and Skype which they felt were more comfortable. For instance, a CSO representative explained that:

"The overall impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our relationship with donors is cordial. Due to the pandemic, we have had more opportunities such as access to e-learning platforms, increased partnership and cooperation as a result of the cordial relationship with them."¹³

¹³ Focus group discussion, CSO representative, 27 July, 2020

4.3.3.2 Cooperation and Partnership

The research finding shows that most of the CSOs were actively involved in working with other CSOs and beneficiaries to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, 26% of CSOs reported that they worked with their partners to inform the public on risk and needed steps while 18% of CSOs were also involved in discussions with other stakeholders on COVID-19 related issues. In addition, 14% of CSOs also reported working in partnership with other organisation to combat fake news (See figure 22).

Similarly, during the FGD, some CSO representatives identified other areas of collaboration and partnership especially in the areas of advocacy for policy and practice change, capacity building, distribution of hygiene materials, awareness raising events, monitoring and documentation, distribution of food and non-food items, and partnership with service providers and other key stakeholders including community leaders to meet the needs of beneficiaries and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic in Sierra Leone.

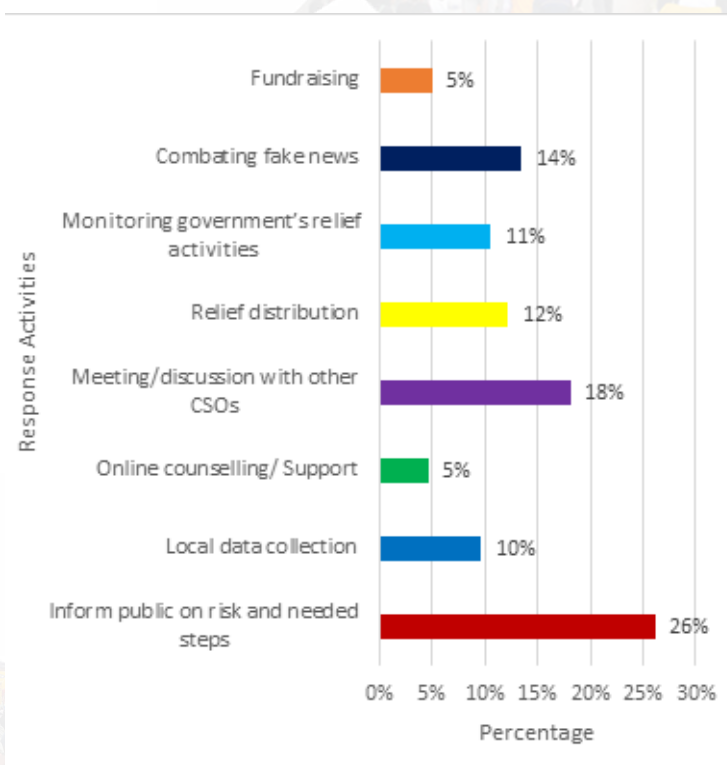


Figure 22: CSOs response activities

Equally, CSOs are also part of national coalitions as well as networks outside of Sierra Leone to coordinate specific COVID-19 related actions in Sierra Leone as explained by a respondent:

“We monitor, identify and respond to rights violations by providing socio-legal services, such as legal information, aid and representation, psychosocial counselling, mediation, and family tracing and reunification, to children in contact and in conflict with the law. In addition, we partner with other service providers to ensure appropriate referrals and to respond to emergency situations.”¹⁴

4.3.4 Lessons learnt from the Adaptation Strategies and Opportunities for CSOs

Based on how CSOs responded to COVID-19, several lessons are emerging that could begin to shape the way the sector operates in future. These lessons and best practices include:

- **Collaboration:** Most of the response activities of CSOs in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic were done in collaborating with other CSOs. This lesson can as well be effective for programme design and implementation in a post COVID-19 era.
- **Domestic resource mobilisation is possible:** Only few CSOs indicated they mobilised domestic resources to support their programmes and interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The limited funding opportunities from international NGOs has created a lesson that local CSOs should find independent ways of mobilising resources for their organisations, operations and programmes.
- **Improved digital transformation and visibility on the work of CSOs:** CSOs have increased their visibility during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is largely because the media is strategically focused on the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic in Sierra Leone, in which CSOs are playing a pivotal role. CSOs also resorted to digital tools to advance their work. They also used online platforms like Skype and Zoom (among others) for online meetings, used Facebook and WhatsApp to communicate with key stakeholders and publicise their work. This is a lesson that CSOs should sustain and continue to improve upon after the COVID-19 pandemic in Sierra Leone. There is a need to continue with such digital transformation and visibility to connect with new audiences and secure new supporters in the post-COVID-19 period.

- **Re-orienting programmes and operations:** CSOs have learnt to be agile and innovative in response to changing operating environments and community needs. This experience provides CSOs with a framework for reviewing and re-assessing their cost structures and operational requirements which could result in significant savings, more efficiency, and possibly stimulate more innovation.
- **Increased demand for CSOs' services due to COVID-19:** As the COVID-19 situation escalates and evolves, the work of CSOs is needed now more than ever. Support services such as counselling, and community education are already in much higher demand than usual and CSOs are being recognised as having a key role to facilitate this.

4.4 CSOs' Perception on Challenges and Opportunities Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic:

4.4.1 Current Challenges for Civil Society

The key challenges include the following:

- **Increased dependency on international NGOs:** The survey results have shown that that 35% of CSOs reported that their primary source of funding for their programmes and operations is from international NGOs. The high rate of dependency, while important, has also created some vulnerabilities for CSOs in Sierra Leone to sustainably fund their operations and programmes.



¹⁴ Focus group discussion, CSO representative, 27 July, 2020

- Limited capacity to effectively adapt and respond to the situations of the COVID-19 pandemic: CSOs have limited resources (both financial, material and human resources) to cope and adapt to the situations of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sierra Leone. The lesson is that with limited resources, it was extremely difficult for CSOs to effectively adapt and respond to the situations presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Restriction of staff movement to implement activities and provide services and programmes to beneficiaries and communities prevents activities that require physical meetings: This is particularly the case for civil society's role in promoting social accountability, as most social accountability tools require engaging local communities to come together to participate in initiatives. This is not possible when social distancing measures are in place.
- Limited domestic revenues to complement external donor support to implement programmes and activities for beneficiaries and communities due to COVID-19: Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, levels and trends in domestic resources for CSOs were already considered insufficient to support the provision of services to beneficiaries and communities. Although a few CSOs were able to raise resources domestically during the pandemic, there remains a dire need to address the capacity needs of CSOs to ensure that they are well equipped to mobilise resources that would guarantee their long-term sustainability.
- Gaining momentum for civic initiatives is difficult: During times of crisis it can be difficult to gain momentum and participants for a cause, as media and public orientation are focused on the emergency. Methods for reaching out have also moved online, which may reduce the potential for broader engagement.
- The extreme poverty within beneficiaries and communities due to COVID-19: Sierra Leone is home to more than 7 million people. More than half of the population live below the poverty line and 25% live in extreme poverty. As a result, many families lack adequate support for their day to day needs or to keep them in school. The COVID-19 pandemic brings an additional threat to vulnerable families whose livelihoods have been affected due to the preventive measures put in place by the government to stop the spread of the disease. This places extreme pressure on CSOs to provide services for beneficiaries and communities.

4.4.2 New Opportunities

- Direct engagement with state agencies and stakeholders to address emerging issues of the COVID-19 pandemic: CSOs should build on this experience to achieve greater support and impact in their programmes and operations in communities.
- Increased opportunities for CSOs to address the challenges of limited resources: During the COVID-19 pandemic, CSOs quickly assembled potential avenues for resource mobilisation such as working with other stakeholders, including the private sector as well as government ministries, department and agencies. This means that if CSOs consistently engaged local and private sectors and partnerships with other organisations, they will be able to address the potential challenge of limited resources and complement international funding.
- Improving the utilisation of technology: Office closures and restrictions on staff movement accelerated the implementation of technological solutions to continue providing services to beneficiaries and communities. It enabled staff to work remotely from home and continue some of their operations, programmes and activities. Staff acquired new skills and gained experience in new technological tools and applications.





- **Building sector solidarity:** Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic created opportunities for CSOs to support each other and work together in response to local community needs and sometimes broader national priorities. CSOs that are working in specific communities, districts or thematic areas benefited from belonging to a community with shared aspirations and challenges.
- **Improving visibility:** - The COVID-19 pandemic has also placed the - spotlight on Sierra Leonean CSOs. More people are now aware of their work, the challenges they face and their roles and contributions during the COVID-19 pandemic. This awareness has resulted in support and recognition. CSOs need to capitalise on this renewed public interest, solidarity and exposure in support of their ongoing operations, activities and programmes.
- **Strengthening evidence-based advocacy:** COVID-19 laid bare the developmental challenges facing the CSO sector in Sierra Leone and the gaps in the service delivery capacity of many governments. CSOs are often at the forefront of highlighting these shortcomings and advocating for changes in public policy and actions.
- **Rethinking operations and programmes:** During the COVID-19 pandemic CSOs quickly adopted new methods of working while initiating new COVID-19 related activities and actions. This demonstrated that CSOs could be innovative in response to changing operating environments and community needs in the future.
- **Improving on local fundraising as an alternative to complement international donors' support:** Despite the significant resource mobilisation challenges faced by CSOs, over 30 per cent of CSOs mobilised local resources to complement international donors' support during the COVID-19 pandemic. CSOs should build on this opportunity by mainstreaming local fundraising interventions within their programmes.



5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS





5.1 Conclusion

This research sought to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected CSOs' operations and the responses adopted by CSOs to ensure their short-term survival and long-term sustainability in Sierra Leone. The following are some of the important conclusions drawn from the research.

- Findings from this research suggest that collaboration and partnerships between civil society organisations, social movements/networks and social activists is crucial to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and

increase the provision of services to people and communities. The findings demonstrate that intra-sectoral collaboration, is the dominant form of collaboration practised by CSOs during the pandemic. This notwithstanding, there were also evidence of collaborations between CSOs and government institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic in Sierra Leone. However, such collaborations were focused on short-term engagements rather than a deliberate attempt to forge sustainable and transformative partnerships that have the potential of providing long lasting solutions to the devastating effects of COVID-19;

- The research also established that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the opportunities for domestic resources mobilisation and public appreciation and recognition for the work of CSOs;
- The findings also drew attention to the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the programmes and operations of CSOs that include, among others; reduced staff strength, restriction of staff movement, cancellation of meetings, conferences and travel, reduced or cancelled operations, cessation of fieldwork and inability to have community interactions, increased demand for services, loss of funding and increased organisational costs.
- The research additionally revealed the challenges experienced by CSOs in transitioning to working remotely as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It revealed that CSOs lack the required resources and capacity, and clearly defined policies for working remotely to reach out to beneficiaries and communities especially since human right violations were on the rise during this pandemic;
- The research has shown that despite these potential challenges, collaboration and partnership among CSOs present opportunities for them to minimise their weaknesses and scale up their impact. Hence, CSOs need to enhance their collaboration in providing the needed support and services to communities.



5.3 Recommendations for Stakeholders Supporting CSOs

Based on the findings of the research, it is evident that CSOs require support to enable them to be fully apt to respond to the challenges posed by COVID-19 and be prepared for future pandemics. The following can be done to provide them with the dire assistance they need:

5.3.1 Donors and Development Partners (International Non-Governmental Organisations) Should:

- Contribute to enhancing the capacity of local CSOs in fundraising and resource mobilisation, strategic communication and ICT, project management, organisational strategy and implementation and social accountability;
- Provide additional and unrestricted funding and work with others in creating pooled funding mechanisms for CSOs;
- Support the digital empowerment of CSOs through strategic investments in their technology infrastructure, from paying for laptops, connectivity and cloud services to staff training;

5.3.2 Central Government Should:

- Provide additional resources for national pandemic preparedness, capacity development, and response measures;
- Provide holistic and systemic approach in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and other emergency situations. This will include the education, human rights, gender, and social protection issues;
- Leverage and utilise CSOs' experience and expertise in planning, coordinating and implementing national responses to the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Provide small grants as well as tax waivers to enhance the resource base of local CSOs to increase the provision of services and programmes in communities impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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